



Letting the words
of Christ renew
our mind and faith
in hard days.

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VINE LIFE

John 15

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants,

because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father as well. If I had not done among them the works no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. As it is, they have seen, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: ‘They hated me without reason.’

“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me. And

you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.

All this I have told you so that you will not fall away. (John 16:1).

The Vine

In an earlier study, we looked at the Transformed Life, by walking through some verses in Paul's letter to the church in Rome (Romans 12). As I prayed about this next period of Friday Focus posts, my mind kept going to the words of Jesus in John 15. After all, how can we live the Transformed Life, if we're not remaining in him?

If you enjoy and practice scripture memorization, I cannot recommend any other chapter as highly as I do this one. To speak these verses is to speak the words of Christ. They are words of comfort, encouragement, exhortation, and hope. They carry such weight and worth.

Let's begin. We're going to take them four verses at a time each week, but I encourage you to stop and read all of John 15.

Here are verses 1 through 4, in the New International Version:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to

*you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you.
No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must
remain in the vine. Neither can you bear
fruit unless you remain in me.*

I love grapes and grape vines. When we lived in Beirut, Lebanon, our house had several grape vines on the property. I learned a lot about them during those years of watching the gardener care for them.

Did you catch that? ***Care for them.***

Yes, grape vines take care. There are so many pests that would just love to attack not just the fruit, but the leaves. I should know, because when we moved back to the United States, my husband planted two grape vines in our backyard — yes, in Tennessee. The only problem was — I wasn't a gardener. I did not care for my vines — so everything attacked, from disease to bugs, birds and squirrels. One vine pretty much shriveled up; the other kept producing leaves, but the fruit left a lot to be desired — pretty fruitless, actually.

So, when I hear Jesus go into so much detail about what Father Gardener does to his vine, I'm not surprised — it's a lot of work to maintain that vine, to keep it in shape to produce fruit.

Then I think about what he's got to work with. I mean, I'm one of those branches that's poking my head out from the main stalk trying to grab hold and do my thing. I can readily admit that I haven't always been very fruitful. I know the pain of the pruning shears. I think about what needed clipping from my life — the sin, self-serving attitude, weakness, and fear that hindered me from bringing glory to God. He had every right to nip it in the bud.

Still does.

I'm just glad he lets me remain a part of the vine. I cannot do this alone. Any good in my life is because of Christ. It's him working through me.

My fruit may not be vast in quantity, but I am determined to remain in him. I'll rely on him doing the rest.

After all, he is the only True Vine.

Are you remaining in Him? Are you even part of the Vine? Don't let a little pruning stop you from holding on.

It's in the pruning that the producing is sure to come.

The Proof's in the Fruit

Have you ever noticed how sometimes you need to hear things more than once to get the point? I've found myself lately realizing (though I think my staff have known it for quite some time) that I don't read emails completely before I respond. Yes, it's true — the writer is not a good reader.

I'm learning to slow down and re-read things. Otherwise, I find I get myself in trouble.

Jesus must have known that about his disciples. I'm sure he knew it about those to come, like me, because he often repeated things to make sure they were hearing and really listening to what he was saying.

There's a difference, you know; hearing and listening. That's probably why Jesus again had to say, "*I* am the vine — *you* are the branches."

Before I go further, let's read through the next set of verses in John, chapter 15. These are verses five through eight. Try adding them to your memorization goals this week.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear

much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:5-8)

Jesus started off this teaching with these words, remember? "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener." He didn't specifically say in that first part that the disciples were the branches, though he talked about them.

Dead branches get cut off; fruitful branches get pruned. Just in case you don't get it, guys, *you* are the branches; I'm the vine you're hanging onto.

Then he reminds them of something else by using the same word three times in four short sentences: *Remain* in me. Added to the four times he said it in the first section, that makes a complete seven! (And he's not done using it, as we'll soon see).

Do you know what I find interesting about that word, *remain*? It really doesn't require anything. We just have to stick in there with Jesus, and he

does the rest. Of course, it is an act of the will — it always is. God doesn't *make* us do anything. Yet, that simple act of choosing to remain in Christ leads to something wonderful — fruit.

Fruit is the end result of remaining. Fruit is the way God gets the glory.

Seems like that should be easy enough. He's not asking for us to have great abilities or do miracles or anything that seems hard. He's only saying remain in The Vine; allow the life-giving juices of his Word to flow through our scrawny branches. The fruit is a guaranteed byproduct of his presence in our lives.

Will this reality change your prayers this week? Will it change your life and focus? Will it change what you look at, read, and watch?

I needed the reminder. How about you?

Complete Joy

During the years that Jesus walked this earth with his disciples, they had seen him speak words of condemnation and warning. Calling the teachers of the Law and Pharisees “whitewashed tombs” comes to mind. Yet, in those last days prior to the crucifixion, Jesus wants his disciples to know only comfort and peace.

His tone is soft, as I’m sure his heart was heavy at the pending sacrifice he would make. The first eight verses of the fifteenth chapter of John were an encouragement for his followers to just hang onto him. *Abide in me. Remain in me.* If they did that, he would definitely remain in them.

Now, listen to these next few words, that remind them of what it’s all about:

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. (John 15:9-12)

He's done it — Jesus has loved these followers, investing three years in their lives, pouring into them day and night, modeling what it means to live for God in a broken world. He has loved them because God first loved.

What did they need to do? He used that favorite word again, *remain*. They just had to rest in that love — remembering all he'd spoken to them, shown them, and ultimately done on their behalf. Knowing that they were loved by Christ, they would be empowered to live according to his teaching, his example, and love others.

He had obeyed the Father's commands, now they would obey his — why? Because they knew the love behind all that had been shared.

It makes me think of when my father used to tell me, "I'm telling you this for your own good. Don't disobey." He was right. Because he loved me, he would tell me, for instance, not to touch the hot stove. My obedience was for my own good, because he loved me enough not to want to see me hurt.

It's the same with God. *This is love for God; to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome...* (1 John 5:3)

Why is Jesus telling this to us and his disciples? So that we will have his joy in us, and it will be enough — complete.

When something is complete, is any more needed? No. His joy satisfies all longing.

- In Christ, we are fully loved.
- In Christ, we have all we need to obey God.
- In Christ, we are made clean.
- In Christ, we have complete joy.
- In Christ, we bear fruit that reveals our relationship to God.
- In Christ, the fruit we bear is to God's glory.

What more could there be? Oh, the joy of it all in Christ.

Friends not Servants

We have different relationships in life: family, colleagues, acquaintances, and friends.

When does an acquaintance become a friend? When there is a deeper intimacy of the relationship. You know the person better, like them more, want to be with them, and even have a love for them.

Friends are special, chosen relationships.

Jesus chooses us as his friends.

That must have really blown the minds of the disciples. I mean, think about it. This was a small group of Jewish men, who followed Jesus, because they saw him as a teacher, a prophet, and even the Messiah. They would never have presumed to tell others outside their group, “hey, come meet our *friend* Jesus.”

In the culture of their day, a rabbi, and definitely the Messiah would be anything but a friend, and yet, Jesus flipped their concepts of God on their heads when he said:

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. (John 15:12-15)

This intimate relationship of remaining that he'd been talking about — remember, *I'm the vine, you are the branches* — this relationship was to be so intimate that they would be able to look upon the Son of God as a friend.

Had anyone known God like that before? Well, actually yes...Abraham. (See James 2:23, 2 Chronicles 20:7, and Isaiah 41:8).

Would they dare, though, to put themselves on the same par as the great Father Abraham, whom God credited as righteous? They may not have dared, but Jesus was willing.

He was willing, because he was going to show them the ultimate demonstration of love that a friend could give. He would show it on the cross. They just couldn't grasp it all yet, but they soon would

understand, and be happy to be known as friends of Jesus.

The abiding relationship with Christ is one that leads to sacrificial love. A servant can't do that, but a friend can. We become friends by accepting the love he first showed us. We show the world we are friends of Christ by living out that love toward one another and others.

Where does your relationship with Jesus stand?
Are you a mere acquaintance or a true friend?

If you are his friend, do what he commands — Love one another.

Chosen for a Purpose

Are you floundering in life? Feel like you have no purpose?

Maybe it's because you haven't responded to the one who's chosen you.

Listen to these words:

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit — fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other. (John 15:16-17)

Jesus stands at the door and knocks. He may have done it through a church service or sermon. Maybe you heard him speaking during a time of tragedy or immense despair. Perhaps a friend or stranger shared the invitation with you. Whatever the case, there was an opportunity given to respond.

You heard something about God's love for you and gift of salvation through Jesus and you had to decide whether you would accept it or not.

It is in that moment that Jesus is reaching out to you. He says, "Come follow me."

There is no chicken before the egg trick in the Gospel. God makes himself known to us; opens the way of salvation. He chooses to call us sons and daughters. He made the first move.

That's what Jesus is telling his disciples here. You're my friends, but don't think too much of yourself because of that. I chose you not just to be buds, but for a purpose — to bear fruit.

Have you found yourself lately watching the news and throwing up your hands, saying, "What's the use? Life is fruitless?" Then you're not attached to the Vine — the True Vine — Jesus.

Those who know him, who remain in him find purpose in the midst of the chaos. Do you think we're the only ones in the world who have ever suffered from diseases, political upheaval, and strife? Don't kid yourself and forget where these guys were living when Jesus showed up. Rome, as in The Empire, where Christians would end up being burned as torches to light the streets at night. Who had more reason to throw up their hands? Let's get over ourselves, please.

We've got a job to do. Bear fruit — fruit that lasts.

It doesn't take a huge amount of effort. We read about this earlier in the chapter. All it requires is remaining in Him. He'll take care of the rest.

When I lean into Christ during a time of crisis, he reminds me to think of others. The first bit of business is to be active in loving our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. How's that going for you, these days? Allowing quarantine and worry to make you forget others?

Either we have a purpose, or we don't, because either we live in the Vine or we don't.

Check your branch to make sure you're staying connected and being fed by the Source of all your strength and energy so that you can live a fruitful life to His glory. Hang in there and stay true to your purpose.

Keep in Mind

Vine Life is the best. As Jesus shared the wonders of this intimate relationship with those first disciples, I'm standing right there with them in awestruck amazement that he would allow me to be part of his vineyard.

As we've walked through the fifteenth chapter of John, we're reminded that fruitfulness requires pruning, but it's that fruit that proves we're united with the Christ Vine in the first place. In his own, gentle way, he tells us that only in this abiding relationship can we know joy that's truly complete, finding our satisfaction in him alone. Leaning into the Vine, our God chooses us, not as servants, but friends — another concept so radical from all other religions; yet, our friendship is not just to chill with Jesus, but to live with purpose.

Today's passage takes a turn, and it's a bit painful. Let's read the next several verses:

"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If

they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.” (John 15:18-21)

Vine Life is not just a choice on God’s part, but on ours. Yet with any choice, there is the inherent knowledge that in choosing one thing, you are saying “no” to another.

For those of us who dwell in the Vine, we say “no” to the world, and that comes with consequences.

For all the love we find in Christ — the love that led him to sacrifice himself on our behalf — hate is hurled our way from the world, because we made a choice between the two: Christ over the world.

But Jesus says, hang in there — **KEEP IN MIND. IT HATED ME FIRST.**

What does that mean? Don’t get too upset about what the world slings at you. It’s to be expected, see? He told you to keep it in mind, remember, don’t forget — Jesus was hated a full 2000 years before you! He took the brunt, the full Monty that all the world, led by Satan, could throw at a person — scorn, shame, beating, crucifixion. He took it all,

all that hatred, so you could let it slide off your back.

You're abiding in him, remember? He's got better things for you than the stupid things the world runs after. They can't stand it when you are calm in the midst of the storm; when you have peace beyond all understanding, and when you love those who hate you.

They hate you for no reason — but there really is a reason, and his name is Jesus.

Just remember, if you're clinging to the Vine, you're living according to his principles, his standard. Don't get dismayed by the ways of this world and the hatred that is so easily flung about. Don't get caught up in it either and let down your love guard.

If you do, there might be some more pruning required to produce fruit that brings God glory. Hang in there – abide in him.

And KEEP IN MIND what he said.

No Excuse

Jesus is talking to his followers about Vine Life. It's such an intimate relationship that fruit is produced, love is shown, and God responds to our requests, because we ask according to his will.

It's also the relationship that causes the world to hate us, but we can handle it, because they're just doing to us what they did to Jesus.

Jesus' arrival on the world stage caused a stir from the very beginning. I'm not talking about the angels who were thrilled to see him and sang his praises; no, I'm talking about the birth of a baby that caused a king to instigate mass murder of all male children in that region.

That was only the beginning. Once he began his ministry, thirty years later, Jesus' presence, his words, his miracles would cause some to go and plot how they could kill him (Matthew 12:14). They eventually succeeded, or so they thought.

Jesus spoke about the religious leaders and others in the world when he told his disciples:

If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now they

have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father as well. If I had not done among them the works no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. As it is, they have seen, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason.' (John 15:22-25)

Those who have no excuse are not only the people who saw Jesus during his time on earth, but all who have come since then. His disciples went out, preaching the good news of the salvation Jesus provides. They wrote down his words and saw the message passed to others who would continue the job. Over the centuries, every continent has had witness to Christ. In our world of radio, television and internet, the spread continues.

There is no excuse.

No one has done what Christ has done. No other religion has the freely-given forgiveness, grace, and hope that is offered through Christ.

And yet, he is still rejected by many.

He was even rejected by his own people when he walked this earth. How much more is he rejected

by those who hear now but enjoy living for self and worldly pleasures?

There's really no reason they should hate Jesus, but they do.

Why? Because he makes them acknowledge their own sinfulness, and few like to admit wrong, give up temporal pleasure, or humble themselves to the all-knowing God.

To hate Christ is to hate God. You can't have one without the other.

It doesn't mean people don't try to follow a god made in their own image, but they'll soon find out there's only one God who can save and bring peace in this broken and sinful world.

All these are without excuse. These are hard words, but they're not mine...they're from Jesus. Not all parts of Vine Life are easy.

The Counselor

Have you ever been to the school counselor? Most of us wouldn't admit it if we had. After all, it usually meant there was something wrong with you or you were making trouble. Things have changed a bit now, as seeing a counselor is considered important for good health.

I'm thankful Jesus saw the need of a counselor for those first disciples, because I need one too. After all he'd shared in this one chapter of John, I can imagine their heads were spinning. Not only had they been told they were to remain in the Vine, but they were to love their friends to the point of death. Even if they did manage to produce fruit, the world was going to hate them for it.

I think a counselor was called for.

That's why Jesus said: *"When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning."* (John 15:26-27)

He knew they couldn't handle the task without help. Only with the power of the Holy Spirit indwelling in us, are we able to comprehend and

live by the words of Christ. Remember who Jesus was talking to? Some fishermen, a tax collector, common guys, and zealots.

Who's he talking to now?

I love what my pastor recently said about the importance of the Holy Spirit in his life. "Without the Holy Spirit, I'm a coward," he said.

Wow, what a confession. What truth. I'm right there with him, as I know the disciples are. Remember, they were the ones who fled after Jesus' arrest; yet, at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came, they were the same ones who preached in multiple languages, stood up to the religious leaders, and rejoiced when flogged for his sake.

That's some Counselor!

The Holy Spirit would remind them of what Jesus had taught them so that they could then tell others. That's his job for us too.

But there's one more verse I want to include to conclude this series on Vine Life. It's actually found in the next chapter:

“All this I have told you so that you will not go astray.” (John 16:1)

The “all this” is the teaching of the two previous chapters — beautiful teaching, hard teaching, and teaching that would require extra power to live by. Why has he taken the time to pour all this wisdom into the disciples, into us?

So we won’t go astray.

When we memorize and meditate on the word of Christ, we can stand firm for him in a world that is turned upside down.

Vine Life

For the last eight weeks, I have used this Friday Focus post to dig deep into the fifteenth chapter of John's gospel and just bask in the words of Jesus. I cannot think of a better way to calm my soul than to hear the comforting voice of the One who loves me most.

This passage has reminded me of the importance of clinging to Jesus. The things of this world are not going to get any easier, but he's always that place of refuge and rest for us. May his words bring you renewed peace and comfort today.

Grace and Peace

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